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By-Kern, Edith

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FLES comprehension tests, administered by television to a large group of elementary school students in a televised French course in Pennsylvania, are outlined in terms of testing methods and skills measured. Skills tested include (1) comprehension of phrases and words in context, simple stories, numbers, dates, times of day, (2) identification and differentiation by sound, and (3) grammatical identification of gender. Examples illustrate the testing methods. Test results are provided and some remarks on the relation of student intelligence and classroom teacher language teaching to class achievement under televised teaching are offered. (AF)

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by Edith Kern

FLES Testing

TO THE CRITICAL OBSERVER, FLES seems, at times, to stand for "Foreign Languages in the Enthusiastic Stage." Arousing interest and enthusiasm among pupils and within the community has been, of course, an important and legitimate concern of those engaged in FLES teaching. But at present we no longer have to prove that children are capable of learning languages with an ease and a feeling of enjoyment lost to the adult. The time has come when we must go beyond the hazy regions of enthusiasm and the vague indication that, somewhere, other cultures exist. We must remember instead that FLES has a contribution to make to the higher concern which prompted its initiation: a revision of language teaching in general.

If we keep this contribution in mind, we must give thought to establishing standards of achievement for both pupils and teachers. And this implies testing. Thus the questions arise as to the kind of testing feasible and the way in which it can be performed. In directing the research of the French Teaching Project—Television at the University of Pennsylvania, I have developed FLES tests to evaluate the achievement of pupils at the end of the project's first year. I shall outline these tests here briefly and indicate their results in the hope that my experiment may serve as a point of departure for further developments in this direction or, at least, foster helpful discussions.

The tests were given to the almost eight hundred pupils participating in the experiment. They were administered over television, while test forms were sent to each class to be distributed among the pupils. Although television made it possible to reach such a comparatively large group and to draw conclusions from the results with greater validity, the tests could be administered in the same way in any class room.

Before attempting an analysis, however, of the testing methods employed, a preamble is necessary:

FLES teaching is usually based on the aural-oral method. The very structure of the term "aural-oral" implies that we are aware of two learning processes. Together they contribute to the knowledge which the pupil acquires. Yet they are not inseparable. Although one could easily devise all sorts of tests to measure oral achievement, such testing is, by its very nature, cumbersome and expensive with regard to time, money, and the personnel it would involve. The evaluation of language fluency and pronunciation would

remain, moreover, highly subjective and unreliable, until the technical equipment at our disposal has been refined to a point where it can register deviations from the ideal in mechanically objective terms. The pupil's aural achievement, on the other hand, can be easily and inexpensively tested. Thus valid comprehension tests can and should be developed.

The comprehension tests, which will be discussed here, reflected not only the vocabulary covered during the course of the year in the daily televised 15-minute lessons but also the "principle of identification" to which these lessons adhered. It was presumed that a process of identification with his own language takes place in the mind of the pupil learning a foreign language. I assumed, for instance, that the pupil who knows the French word *maison* identifies it in his mind with the concept of a house—however vague—and has no difficulty whatsoever in recognizing the English word *house* as the equivalent of French *maison*: or that a child rising, upon being told "*levez-vous*," is aware of the fact that *levez-vous* is the equivalent of *get up* or *stand up*. It is, after all, an accepted joke that the fanatic adherent to the direct method of language teaching finds himself facing a desperately frowning group of students while repeating *la chaise, la chaise, la chaise*, only to see the frown dissolve in the uttering, followed by a sigh of relief: "Ah, he means the chair."

I should like to add, however, that I think this process of identification far removed from that of translation, so highly criticized today. Translating, though a respectable and even subtle art in itself, may prove, of course, a dangerous intruder in the formation of aural-oral skills, if it is treated as the main principle in language teaching. There is no doubt that the development of aural-oral abilities and facility requires whole stretches of language experience into which no translating must intrude and where language is sensed as an entity and not a mosaic of grammatical rules and words. Identification, on the other hand, cannot be excluded from language learning without creating hopeless misunderstandings—a fact clearly illustrated by popular adoption of foreign words, such as the famous French *vasistas* or the glass slipper of the fairy tale which once upon a time was the "fur slipper."

If we assume, then, that a process of identification of meaning takes place in the mind of the language learner, various ways of testing suggest themselves. All that is required is that the pupil be provided with a pencil and a test sheet, prepared for the purpose, and that he listen to the examining teacher. The following testing methods were used in the experiment:

- (1) Selection of one of three English statements which corresponds to a French statement made, and rejection of the incorrect statement.
- (2) The writing of numerals dictated in French in one form or another.

- (3) Multiple choice with regard to identifying parts of drawings, which were referred to orally in French.
- (4) Identifying parts of the body by marking pictures as the examiner directed in French.

To this might be added the simple drawing of simple objects.

- (5) Selecting one correct statement out of three, about a story told in French, and rejecting the incorrect statements.

The areas tested in this manner were as follows:

Comprehension of phrases and words in context.

Comprehension of simple stories.

Comprehension of numbers, dates, time of day.

Identification and differentiation with regard to sound.

Grammatical identification of gender.

Here are some ways of testing comprehension:

The teacher makes the statement (repeating once): *Venez chez moi!* On his answer sheet, the pupil finds three statements, only one of which is the English equivalent of the French he has heard:

go to school ____

come to my house ____

come here ____

The student must select and check the correct equivalent, rejecting the other statements. In the preceding example, knowledge of the entire phrase is tested. In the example which follows, on the other hand, stress is placed on the testing of individual words. Although these words are presented in context, in adherence to the pattern in which they were learned, only one part of the sentence is variable and can thus be tested individually.

Example:

Teacher: *Voilà un journal français.*

The pupil must select the correct equivalent from the following possibilities:

There is a French boy ____

There is a French book ____

There is a French newspaper ____

In the following example, the variable factor is a phrase rather than a word:

Teacher: *Où est la rue Chestnut?*

The pupil checks the appropriate English equivalent:

He lives on Chestnut Street ____

Where is Chestnut Street ____

There is Chestnut Street ____

In a more complex and cohesive manner, comprehension and vocabulary

can be tested by presenting a brief story in French. The student then is required to select and check statements pertaining to the story:

Teacher: *Voilà une petite fille.*

Elle a neuf ans.

Elle porte un chaperon rouge.

Elle s'appelle le petit chaperon rouge.

Elle porte un panier.

The pupil has to choose from the following statements on his answer sheet, rejecting those that are incorrect:

She wears a red coat ____

She carries eggs ____

She carries a basket ____

When it comes to the testing of expressions containing numerals, the process of identification with the mother tongue can be reduced to a minimum.

The teacher may restrict himself to the statement "écrivez le numéro" adding the number he wishes to test, whereas the pupil must write down the number heard as a numeral at the place reserved for this purpose on his answer sheet.

In the same manner, dates dictated by the teacher as well as the hours of the day can be recorded by the pupil, in the form of numerals, upon his answer sheet.

The process of identification with the mother tongue can also be almost excluded, if the pupil is asked to number pictures, represented on his answer sheet, in the order in which they are named by the examiner. In reverse, the pupil may be asked to draw objects mentioned, if they are so simple that they do not test his draftsmanship or speed rather than his knowledge of French.

But above and beyond attempting to test the areas of vocabulary and comprehension in context, the FLES test administered to the 800 pupils enrolled also ventured to examine the pupils' ability to differentiate between French sounds of some similarity. Any FLES teacher is aware of the fact that "le" and "la" sound almost identical to the average pupil. Since proper differentiation between them is, however, of great importance in any mastery of French, the difference in sound was stressed at an early stage, and the concept of masculine and feminine nouns introduced. Knowledge in this area was tested in the following manner:

A noun was stated by the examiner with its appropriate article. The pupil who, in deviation from the otherwise strictly aural-oral pattern of first-year teaching, had been taught the spelling of "le" and "la" was asked to check either "le" or "la" as the correct sound and article. Example:

Teacher: *Montrez-moi le crayon!*

Pupil: le ____

la ____

Grammar was tested, moreover, to the extent that the pupils were asked to select "le" or "la" as grammatically corresponding to the "un" or "une" or the "au" or "à la" used by the teacher.

Example:

Teacher: *J'ai mal à la tête.*

Pupil: le ____

la ____

or:

Teacher: *J'ai mal au pied.*

Pupil: le ____

la ____

or:

Teacher: *Voilà une pomme.*

Pupil: le ____

la ____

or:

Teacher: *Voilà un bonbon.*

Pupil: le ____

la ____

The tests were administered over television on three consecutive days at the hour of the daily 15-minute telecast and thus added up to about forty-two minutes. The answer sheets were sent previously to the 15 participating public and private schools (28 class rooms). In their entirety, the tests attempted to be representative as far as possible of the vocabulary introduced during the year's course.

Of the 800 pupils in the project:

749 participated on all three days of the test.

Only these were counted.

35 of these pupils made perfect scores of 100.

The lowest score of 22 was made by 1 pupil, to be followed by 5 scores between 31 and 40.

Thus the upper quartile of achievement ranged from 100-92.

The second quartile from 91-84.

The third quartile from 83-73.

Only 77 pupils, that is roughly 10% of all the students, had test scores below 60,

and only 6 of those below 40.

The median test score of all pupils was 84.

Of the 28 participating classes,

all had one or more scores above 90,

23 had one or more scores between 96 and 100.

This means that even classes with the lowest median test score, had one or more test scores above 90.

TABLE

TABLE

	Median Test Score	Median Intelligence Score	Teacher's Language Training in years			
			French			Other
			El.	H.S.	Col.	
(Classes using California Intelligence Test)						
1	98	126	1	4	2	—
2	93	111	—	2	—	—
3	89	110	—	—	2	—
4	88	126	—	2	2	—
5	87	127	—	3	—	—
6	87	124	—	3	1	—
7	85	112	—	2	2	—
8	85	112	—	3	—	—
9	84	121	—	2	—	1 Sp.
10	83	119	—	2	—	2 L.
11	83	116	—	1	—	—
12	83	114	—	3	1	—
13	82	124	*	*	*	*
14	82	119	—	—	—	—
15	82	115	2	2	—	3 L.
16**	75	121	—	3	4	—
17	74	110	—	—	1	—
18**	71	122	—	—	—	2 Gr/4 L.
19	68	105	—	—	—	—
20	65	112	—	—	—	2 Sp/2 Gr.
21	63	108	—	—	—	—
22	59	99	—	—	—	—
(Classes using Philadelphia Intelligence Test)						
23	95	120	—	2	1	—
24	86	110	—	—	—	2 Sp/4 L.
25	86	110	—	—	—	—
(Classes using Kulman-Anderson Intelligence Test)						
26	94	109	—	1	1	—
27	83	105	—	1	—	—
28	80	103	—	2	2	—

* Information not available.

** Teachers offered special explanation for low achievement.

The test score medians of all the participating classes ranged from 59 to 98.

In evaluating these test results, it must be kept in mind that *teaching time* throughout the entire year amounted to roughly 30 hours;

the *schools* were not selected on any basis other than stability of student population;
in these schools *all fourth graders* participated and only 1 class consisted of gifted children (see Table, class 1);
intelligence scores of individual pupils ranged from 68–157;
the *median intelligence scores* of the 28 classes ranged from 99–127;
none of the 28 *teachers* in the classrooms receiving the televised lessons was qualified to teach French:

17 teachers had had one or more years of high school French

11 of these had had also one or more years of college French

3 had never studied French but had studied another foreign language

5 had never studied any foreign language.¹

Of the many factors which enter into televised teaching, I shall discuss here briefly only that of teacher training, so as not to go beyond the scope of this article. It cannot be separated, of course, from the element of student intelligence in language learning—which is again of general interest.

The following table shows the 28 participating classes divided into three groups, according to the intelligence test used, and arranged, within each group, in the order of test achievement. The teacher's previous training in French, as well as any other language, is also indicated.

A brief glance at the table reveals the close correspondence between intelligence and achievement, if we consider the group medians used in this table. (Individual achievement scores, on the other hand, often deviate considerably one way or another.)

The table indicates, moreover, that, in televised teaching, the classroom teacher's *previous* training in French or any other foreign language is not the most decisive factor in class achievement. It is true that the lowest median test scores were made by classes #21 and #22, where the teachers had no previous training in French or any other language. But in these cases the median intelligence of each group was also quite low. It is also true that the class ranking highest in achievement had a classroom teacher with the unusually impressive preparation of seven years (1 ES/4HS/2 Coll.) in French. But this class also ranked second highest in median intelligence (126) and consisted of gifted children exclusively. On the other hand, class #16, with a median intelligence of 121, whose teacher was even better prepared (3 HS/4 Coll.), ranked only 22nd in achievement. It was considerably outdistanced by class #25, with a median intelligence score of only 110 and whose teacher had no previous training in any foreign language. It was definitely outranked by class #2 with its median intelligence of 111 and a teacher who had studied French for two years in high school, a long time ago. For this class had a median test score of 93 and ranked fourth among

¹ Information about one teacher was not available.

all classes. Where the table shows noticeable deviations from the otherwise close relationship between median achievement and median intelligence of a class, it seemed always due to the particular interest or lack of interest on the part of the teacher. But a detailed investigation of this problem, which specifically concerns television, has no room in a discussion of FLES testing in general and must be saved for another time and place.

The preceding observations suffice, I hope, to show that FLES testing is possible; that it should be investigated further; and that it can help us gain better insights into the problems confronting FLES teaching and establish the standards of achievement which will prove its worth.

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Edith Kern received her PhD at Johns Hopkins; since 1945 she has been teaching French language and literature courses at the graduate and undergraduate level and has published a number of articles. Dr. Kern is presently Director of the French Teaching Project (Television) at the University of Pennsylvania.

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